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BALZAC.

THERE must be many homes in England in which only a few, if any, French novels stand on the bookshelves; and for obvious reasons. Everyone knows that there are many very beautiful novels in French, some of which are worthy to rank with the world's finest prose works. But everyone is also aware that many French books deal with subjects which in England are not deemed suitable for general reading. Tastes differ: and the longer English people keep their refined ideas the better. It is those undesirable volumes that keep the good ones out—for fear of leaving one bad book about many refuse to leave any about. And yet it is a pity that good French novels are not more often read in the original in England. Prose has attained great perfection in France, and to study the language of the best writers is in itself an education. But not only does one lose the beauty of the language in translations: one also seeks in vain for the translator who can render into another language the peculiarities of the original, the many little details which distinguish it from the idioms of other nations, and the strange native beauties which each language possesses to a greater or lesser degree. It is with a view to giving the names of some of the best and most suitable novels that these notes have been written, and their object will have been fulfilled if some of the beautiful books written during the course of the nineteenth century in France become (to use Emerson's expression) new stars in our readers' literary firmament.

Probably few people would own to reading books only for the sake of "killing time." Some read for amusement—that is to say, they like to converse with a clever mind that lies behind the print; others read for instruction, and will leave the most touching scene or the most exquisite landscape-painting to find the meaning of a word or the characteristic of a plant. For the young the pages are tinted with the roseate hues of the future; for the old there seems to be an autumn atmosphere of remembrance, mists in which the

summer sunshine seems to linger. But for all there is the *spirit* of a book, so difficult to define and yet so inevitable, that it is, so to speak, the outcome of the author's very soul. It springs from his habitual way of thinking, from the philosophy which guides his life and from the religion by which his love is fed. It is to learn to know this *spirit* that we ought to read. Truths are repeated, facts recorded, love, hate, hope, despair, and all the hundred incidents of the inner life, as well as the sequence of events termed plot or history—all these are brought before us by every author with more or less skill, but always on the same white page and with the same black letters. The main difference lies in the *how* and *why*—two essential factors of the *spirit* of a book.

Two answers might be given to the question, "*Why* did Balzac write?" The first would be: he had a great talent for writing, and his powerful genius found the pen to be the point of least resistance. The other reason is that he was nearly always in need of money, and so he wrote for money. That is, perhaps, why his books are so terribly full of money matters. The fortunes of his characters are nearly always detailed: we are told whence the wealth sprang, how it was invested and what income it produced. Pages and pages of such details begin to weary even the patient reader; but it must be remembered that these questions regarding money are as important in the plan of the work as are the long discussions on religious and political topics. Balzac looked upon money as one of the great—if not quite the greatest—force in modern life. Little wonder if the man whose head was full of the wildest schemes for making millions and whose purse was nearly always empty (comparatively speaking) was apt to overestimate the real importance of money. Undoubtedly it *is* one of the largest wheels in the world's complicated machinery—one on which even the smallest wheel must depend; and yet all must have the feeling that Balzac made too much of it; that, after all, we do not live in a world of coins of gold and silver, but amidst men and women whose instinct for something higher is always, perhaps in spite of themselves, stronger than the fascination of the world.

And if one asks *how* Balzac leads his readers into his world and to what end he points out to them with so much skill the beauty and the ugliness, the good and evil in his

land of fiction, there can be but one answer. His main idea is a moral one—sometimes, as has been hinted already, he insists upon it to the detriment of his art. There is an interesting volume, edited by Alphonse Pagès, entitled *Balzac Moraliste*, and though it was written many years ago, the idea which suggested its publication seems still to come to many as a surprise. They will be sure to say that morals are the last thing to be looked for in Balzac; and it is certain that his books are neither novels with a moral nor volumes of wise proverbs. But the works of Balzac—they are a literature by themselves—are all that novels can be, and by the word *novel* we mean that form of literature which has been chosen by so many modern thinkers as their vehicle of thought. It is well to bear in mind when studying the writings of very prolific writers that it is essential to choose some point of view to commence with. In the course of study the author becomes more familiar, and other aspects must be considered until the reader can obtain a view of the whole. But whatever phase of Balzac's work we choose to study, it always seems as if there had been two minds at work: one the materialistic, close observer of the human heart, sceptical almost and terribly realistic in the smallest details, seeming to take pleasure in revealing the motives which underlie our good actions as well as our trespasses; the other casts an atmosphere of beauty over landscapes, homes and hearts; it shows us, as poetry must, all that is so plain when once we see it, it reminds us of the nobility of life and of the presence of the unseen Power which directs the least and most trivial events. In other words there is the man Balzac, so strange and inexplicable that it is difficult to condemn even what seems downright folly, and, within that outer man, the poet whose mission is, as he has said himself, to reveal to us the poetry of everything which occupies our thoughts. And who but a poet could have made us feel sympathy for many of the awful characters which people his *Comédie Humaine*?

In *Eugénie Grandet*, a book which all should read, he asks "Les philosophes qui rencontrent des Nanon, des Madame Grandet, des Eugénie, ne sont-ils pas en droit de trouver que l'ironie est le fond du caractère de la Providence?" Aye, indeed, for has it not been said that the world consists of

those who laugh and of those who are laughed at? But the exquisite comedy of many of the scenes in *Eugénie Grandet*, such, for instance, as when the miser tells his child Eugénie to accept the gift offered by her friends—"M. Grandet dit un, 'Prends, ma fille!' dont l'accent eût illustré un acteur"—or when the family and friends sit, apparently playing cards, but all, with the exception of the child Eugénie and Nanon the servant, thinking of the miser's millions; or the ridiculous scenes, so full of pathos, when Eugénie and her mother do their utmost to make Charles, the cousin from Paris, comfortable in their miserable home without the miser's knowledge; or lastly, to mention the finest scene of all, when, on a New Year's day, the miser asks Eugénie for the gold she has given to her cousin to help him on his journey, such scenes as these make us realise what tragedy can underlie the most absurd and homely quarrels, and how every minute can be blessed or tainted by our passions. Balzac points this out when he says: "*Eugénie, devenue aussi rusée par amour que son père l'était par avarice . . .*" But if all intense passions seem the same, we feel there is a difference, such as for instance between the miser's terrible "*Ta, ta, ta, ta!*" or his "*nous verrons cela,*" and Eugénie's sweet egoism: speaking of her lover she says "*Pensons à lui, ma mère, et n'en parlons pas. Vous souffrez, vous avant tout.*" Tout, c'était lui." Grandet is as fine a creation as Molière's Avare. So realistic is the picture that we can almost sympathise with the abjectness of the man, so enthralled by the love of gold that he sacrifices wife and child to it. His daughter Eugénie survived his cruelty, but his poor wife passed away without a word of complaint, only a sad prophecy: "*Mon enfant, il n'y a de bonheur que dans le ciel, tu le sauras un jour.*" Eugénie lived on, cherishing the love which explained to her the meaning of eternity, and giving up her life to the service of the poor. The only character who seems really blessed with happiness is the servant Nanon. But if Grandet and his wife are piteous characters, we feel that Eugénie has her reward, "*la femme a cela de commun avec l'ange, que les êtres souffrants lui appartiennent.*"

Another sad, but very beautiful novel, is *Pierrette*. Balzac dedicated it to a child, thinking that perhaps she might learn to realise her own happiness when reading a tale so full of

melancholy. And is not that the only excuse for writing about sad things? The contemplation of great misery nobly endured casts our petty worries to the background, and helps us to see where lies real happiness, we mean in giving up one's life for others' happiness. And, at the same time, suffering and sorrow are touchstones of sublimity. The story of Calvary is the sublimest of all stories of suffering—all others are grand in proportion to the nobleness of the pain and grief.

Pierrette is a poor orphan entrusted to the care of two relations who cannot appreciate her loving, sensitive nature because their hearts are dead to all real sentiment; they have been hardened by the struggle for life; and their longing for the country, the visions which haunted their dingy shop in Paris seem to have been the last trace of poetry within them, doomed to fade when once their object was attained. Pierrette is gradually done to death; her life is extinguished like a lamp which is unrefueled. They merely neglected her at first; but her heart longed for words of kindness and never heard them until the end was nigh: and then it was in the joy of being loved that she found strength to suffer. Her death is pathetically told; she passes away gently, growing more and more beautiful as she approaches the life beyond; and her last moments are brightened by the presence of the boy who loved her, of the old grandmother who saved her from her cruel guardians, and of the noble doctor.

To revert to what has been said above with reference to choosing some point of view: the doctor in *Pierrette* must attract the attention of many readers, for he is an ideal doctor; and it will be found that Balzac has developed this character in two novels—the first one treating of a village doctor, *le médecin de campagne*, the second of a physician of the soul, *le curé de village*.

In *Le Médecin de Campagne* we find all we could expect from the man who wrote so beautifully about the medical calling in *Pierrette*. He brings before us a man who has given up his life to improving the condition of a country-side in France near Grenoble. When first he went as doctor to the village, noted for the number of its imbeciles, and attempted to prevent the spreading of that terrible disease by drastic measures, the inhabitants tried to stone him. Some years

later he was so beloved that no one would have dreamt of doubting his word—all would, in fact, have been ready to stone one who raised a hand against him. And it is his life story and the way in which he helped to raise the peasants from a state of poverty to one of prosperity and active life, which constitute the novel. The doctor is the dominant character of the book; but there are other figures which fascinate; such an one is La Fosseuse, a poor frail child who needed the gentlest care and sympathy to help her to withstand the roughness of the world. She was like one of those delicate spring flowers which blossom only if the sun shine on their paleness, droop and wither when at night the winter's breath still lingers on the ground. When the doctor dies and she kneels weeping by his grave, her life is saved and she is strong enough to stand alone, though hearts like hers seem doomed to suffering, as if to compensate the exquisite happiness they alone can know. She would feel sad when the sky was dreary, and weep with the clouds; a fine day made her look more beautiful, and the perfume of a flower afforded her a day's delight. Tears would roll down her cheeks as she watched the landscape when the evening fell, and though she could but seldom give expression to her feelings, a wealth of thought was in her eyes. Fitful, vain, loving, timid, taking no thought for the morrow, she had all the attributes of gentle womanhood; all she needed was a hand to aid and guide her. And Balzac has described how the sincerity and patience of the doctor gave her the confidence she needed, and led her to a life more in obedience to the daily round of a work-a-day world. She was like a slender vessel tossing on rough waters, which only patience and great care can restore to calmer roads. How many are the tender children cast too soon upon the rough paths of life who could be comforted, and in some cases saved, by sympathetic love and care such as gave La Fosseuse strength for many years of useful life! And it was thus with all who needed the doctor's help. His time, his money and his knowledge were devoted to bettering the lot of the villagers; so, when death came to him, he lived on in their hearts, and the humble mound they raised upon his grave was a monument which spoke of an existence spent for the one true purpose of this life.

Le Curé de Village contains two protagonists—M. le Curé Bonnet, and Véronique, the daughter of one miser and the wife of another. The story of her childhood and first years of married life reminds one of the pathetic picture of Eugénie Grandet's life. But the misers soon give place to other more noble passions. There is the terrible figure of Tascheron who has been condemned for theft and murder, raging so wildly in his cell that none can even approach him, except the *curé*, who calms him and sets his mind at peace before the end. There is that other criminal Farrabesche, also called to repentance by the *curé* and converted to a life of useful activity. And, lastly, there is Véronique herself; she who seemed to all so perfect was brought to death's door by her terrible secret; and the *curé* led her also to the source of all happiness and peace. The *curé's* work seems contrasted with that of the *médecin de campagne*. They are analogous, for the one heals their minds by curing their bodily ailments, and the other saves their souls by doing away with some moral disease. But the *curé* seems further from us, on a higher level. In *Le Médecin de Campagne* the doctor is by far the most important figure; in the *Curé de Village* it is Véronique who occupies the foreground; yet we feel that over and above all the characters there is the saintly *curé*.

Of the four novels we have mentioned, the last two may be found to be difficult reading. If they contain much philosophy that is very beautiful and profound, it is, perhaps, somewhat to the detriment of the story. The connecting thread is often lost in the long conversations and dissertations regarding political economy, religion and similar subjects. Like all men of genius, Balzac wrote books which contain more thought than the works of many average authors together. The volume, *Balzac Moraliste*, is an illustration of this, for it is nothing but a selection of the maxims to be found scattered about in Balzac's novels, and yet it compares with such finished books as those of La Bruyère, La Rochefoucauld and Pascal. In the same way books might be written on one or another of the hundred subjects which Balzac studied and wrote about with so much fervour. But want of space prevents even the mention of any of them, except, perhaps, one which is dominant in the books we have mentioned. It is the conviction that home and family form the foundation

on which everything must rest. There is only one thing, Balzac says, which is more important, and that is religion. And by religion he means not only the sentiment of dependence upon God which nowadays is often held to be all that is needed, but also the outward forms and ceremonies of the church. There is a striking illustration of this in *Le Médecin de Campagne*; he contrasts a death in the house of the valley and death in the mountain home. Anyone who reads carefully that chapter (Ch. II., "*à travers champs*") cannot fail to feel the weakness of the peasants who do not know what mourning means and the grand simplicity of the scene in the farmhouse on the hill. The death-scene there has the power of a Greek tragedy; there insincerity would vanish in the presence of such true heartfelt sentiments which are the fruit of a blameless life. All outward forms and rites must be either sublime or trivial: there is no medium, for the spirit knows no mediocrity. When funeral ceremonies are sublime the living seem to stand awhile together with the dead, where a pure light shines and reveals the inmost heart. Man is for a few moments transfigured by the contact with death, grief, hope and trust. Such moments are an ever active power within the heart, ever cherished and recalled. So with all the noble institutions which link families with bonds of love. The home is to childhood what the Church becomes to manhood; and the reminiscence of the rules at home will form the basis of the philosophy of riper years.

Perhaps these few notes may induce some to study these four volumes more closely for themselves. G. L. F.